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Coffee and Danish in Sanpete County, Utah: An Exploration of Food Rituals and Language Shift

Elizabeth Peterson

1. Introduction

While religiously-motivated settlements in the United States are nothing short of typical, the situation in the western state of Utah is rare, maybe even unique, in many ways. The first permanent White settlements in Utah comprised English-speaking members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons) starting in 1847. Scandinavian languages were the first immigrant languages to arrive en masse. By the 1930s, when the settlement era was coming to an end, some 29,000 Scandinavians had migrated to Utah, which at the time had a population of about 500,000. More than half the Scandinavian immigrants were Danes, approximately one third were Swedish, and 13 percent were Norwegian. Typically, these migrants were from poor, rural areas, the majority coming from Jutland.

The Mormon migration was unlike others in that multiple generations migrated together, and women slightly outnumbered men. Utah Territory was not yet a state, nor was it settled by Europeans; the long-term inhabitants were Ute Indians. The Scandinavian migrants joined English-speaking Mormon settlers in establishing fledgling communities in the rugged landscape. Their day-to-day existence was a mix of new experiences imbued with the rituals that comprised their worldview, all under the watchful eye of the Mormon Church leaders, who encouraged integration into the new milieu for reasons of survival. At the time of settlement, the linguistic expectation proposed by the Church leader of the time, Brigham Young, was of a dual nature: immigrants to Utah should learn English to aid in their integration and foster their survival, but with allowances recognizing that adult learners of English could not readily abandon their mother tongue (Henrichsen & Bailey 2010).

Aside from the language expectations, a collection of other lifestyle mandates was in effect during the early years in Utah Territory. For example, the LDS Church still condoned the practice of polygamy, or plural marriage, meaning that a man was expected to have more than one wife in order to achieve a full high standing within church hierarchy.¹ Faithful Mormons were also offered suggestions about what they should eat and drink. A Church doctrine introduced in 1835, the Word of Wisdom, suggested that Church members should maintain a healthy diet that included grains, fruits and vegetables, little meat, and abstinence from coffee, tea, alcohol and tobacco (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2017). During the early years of the LDS Church and subsequent settlement in Utah, many observant church members, including church leaders, did not fully follow the Word of Wisdom. This changed in 1921, when the LDS president upgraded the Word of Wisdom from “advisory” to “commandment.”

Interviews conducted with Utah residents of Scandinavian descent demonstrate that many Scandinavian forbearers were reluctant to give up coffee, a ritual which had spread into the Scandinavian peasant class by the 19th century. The migrants to Utah would have been used to a three-times-a-day coffee routine. This system had been a hard-earned right, as coffee moved from being a luxury product into a socially-suitable substitute, even among pious church-goers, for alcohol (Schivelbusch 1992; Hyldtoft 2016).²

There is an established relationship between food rituals and heritage culture, with food rituals often serving as a most enduring connection to an immigrant past (see, e.g., Gabaccia 2000). With this analysis, a link is made between food rituals and heritage language, a relatively unexplored relationship. The impetus for this exploration comes from fieldwork carried out in Sanpete County, Utah, a location

* Elizabeth Peterson, University of Helsinki, elizabeth.peterson@helsinki.fi. Thank you to the audience at WILA8 in Copenhagen (2017), to the anonymous reviewers, and especially to the editors of this volume for allowing me to pursue the relationship of food rituals and language shift.

¹ The LDS Church no longer allows polygamy: the practice was officially banned in 1890.

² Thanks to Carol Gold for her input on food heritage in the USA.

featuring an exceptionally high immigrant population of people from Denmark³ and Scandinavia. It is important to note that an investigation of the coffee ritual was not an original aim of the data collection. During the interviews, I noticed that many interviewees discussed coffee, even when I (the interviewer) did not bring up the topic. The converging themes of coffee and Danish language presented a connection in the minds of those interviewed that I wanted to explore further⁴. Thus, this article is an initial attempt to piece together discourses about coffee and Danish language as interacting heritage artifacts.

The data offered here is best viewed as narratives of past events. That is, while the Sanpete County residents I interviewed offered personal accounts of their own life and the people they knew, their descriptions are nonetheless second-hand accounts of past events. There is no way to go back in time and witness any first-hand interactions between coffee rituals and the use of Danish language, but the reported data I obtained offers valuable insights into how these cultural notions have been perceived and incorporated into localized discourses about heritage Danishness and what it means to today's Sanpete County community.

The following four research questions are explored:

RQ1. How do the interviewees link the historically cultural taboos of coffee and Danish?

RQ2. How and why did the coffee ritual die?

RQ3. How did/do locals justify the drinking of coffee?

RQ4. What do such rituals mean in terms of representations of localized Danishness today?

2. Focus on Sanpete County

In general, it has been observed that the three-generation shift language process was the norm in Utah among Scandinavian settlers (Henrichsen et al 2010; Henrichsen & Bailey 2010). Salt Lake City was the largest and most established of Utah cities at the time Scandinavian settlers began to arrive, and Salt Lake City is where the largest number of Scandinavian settlers ended up. From a linguistic and cultural point of view, this is not the most interesting population, however. With regard to cultural and linguistic longevity, the locations where Scandinavian settlers created a population majority are of more interest, for example, Sevier County, Box Elder County, and Sanpete County, the latter which of which even today has the second largest density of Danish-heritage population in the United States (U.S. Census 2000; Grøngaard Jeppesen 2010). The current population of the County is around 28,000 (U.S. Census 2000), in an area of approximately 4,150 square kilometers.

Sanpete County is a place where Scandinavian heritage is at the forefront of local identity. Local architecture, business names, home decor and landmarks offer visible reminders of this heritage. Perhaps the most significant outward nod toward a Scandinavian past is the local Scandinavian Festival, a two-day event held in Sanpete County's largest town, Ephraim. Importantly, the Scandinavian identity is at this stage locally constructed and enacted: it is a local version of what it means to be Scandinavian.

In Sanpete County, the large population of Scandinavian immigrants, coupled with geographical remoteness, led to a situation in which the language shift process and cultural acclimation was not always as straightforward as in other areas of Utah. The preservation of Danish language and cultural manifestations has been correlated with women and their role in society (see, e.g., Abbott 2013) especially the relationship between grandmothers and grandchildren (see Kühl & Peterson 2018). Danish lexical items relating to the home, especially food items, were found to be in use among the oldest generation as late as 2016. This finding underlines the connection between food and language as heritage artifacts. While food-related lexical items have remained, productive use of Danish appears to have died out concurrently with the coffee ritual. While this is perhaps a coincidence, the practices appear to be linked in accounts of local history, including my interview data.

³ While other Scandinavian settlers also brought the coffee ritual with them to Utah, this study focuses on the preservation of Danish language in relation to coffee. The rationale for this is that, due to their number, Danish has left a traceable thread, due to the sheer volume of speakers and, in relation to this, the possibility for endogamy.

⁴ It should be noted that the idea to explore this area was initially inspired by Professor Emeritus Christopher Hale of the University of Alberta. Professor Hale reported that one of his students found, through her investigations of Danish Mormon communities in Alberta, that "when they gave up coffee, they also gave up Danish." (personal communication, 25 September 2015).

3. Coffee in Sanpete County

The role of coffee, alcohol, and following the Word of Wisdom has been noted extensively in folklore, historic and literary accounts of Sanpete County, especially relating to the Danish and Scandinavian settlers. Most recently, Allen (2017) cites “folkloric accounts” that emphasize how the Danish Mormons “modified certain aspects of Mormon culture to accommodate their Danish habits and preferences, particularly regarding the Mormon health code known as the Word of Wisdom” (p. 113). Allen cites several examples, including Sarah Peterson, a Sanpete County resident of Norwegian heritage, who is said to have married her husband only after he promised he would never forbid her to drink coffee – and that he would never take another wife.

The continued use of coffee and alcohol is often reported in the speaking style that typified a Scandinavian immigrant to Sanpete County, thereby bringing to the forefront both the refusal (or inability) to give up coffee and alcohol as well as a first-language accent. This effect is illustrated through two stories in Cheney (1959), one of which is cited here:

“I said to them, ‘Scall ya have a drink of vine?’ An they said, ‘Vell, I guess a leetle bit vont heirt.’ An they stayed and talked and talked an I said, ‘Scall ya have anoder drink of vine?’ And they said, ‘Vell, I guess a leetle bit vont heirt.’ An they stayed an talked an drink vine. They valked da plank over da canal, ven they come up, but they vaded da creek a goin home.” (Cheney 1959: 103)

Sanpete County’s most well-known author, Virginia Sorensen, offers numerous details about Danish people and customs from her childhood in the early 1900s. In a short story about her Danish aunt and uncle, she writes, “Polygamy and the Word of Wisdom – we Danes didn’t take to either one” (Sorensen 1955: 168).

While these examples do not serve as primary data, they demonstrate the characteristics Scandinavian settlers maintained in contrast or even in defiance to the expectations of early LDS settlers.

4. Data and method

This study draws on data collected between the years 2012 and 2016. The overall material comprises notebook data, historical records, privately held artifacts such as photographs, letters and diaries, as well as about 18.5 hours of audio-recorded interviews from people native to Sanpete County. To date, about 65,000 words from these interviews have been transcribed. The transcriptions are the main data source for this analysis.

The transcriptions are from face-to-face conversations with older individuals, ranging from age 94 (at the time of interviewing) to age 67 (at the time of interviewing). The mean age at the time of interviewing was 82, while the most frequent age was around 85. The interviews included 11 women and seven men. Like many rural communities, this one features dense and multiplex relationships. Many of the people who were interviewed are neighbors, go to the same church meetings, frequent the same local businesses, and are related to each other through blood or marriage. There were two main family networks among the participants, accounting for 13 of the people interviewed.

Content analysis was the main method used to observe the interview data. Content analysis entails searching the transcribed data using key words (Scheier 2012). For this analysis, the key words employed were *Danish*, *Danish language*, *coffee* and *drink*. At this juncture, further tiers of key words are not self-evident nor necessary to address the study goals.

It should be noted that there was no explicit questioning during the interviews along the lines of “Did your parents/grandparents drink coffee at home?” Rather, customs related to alcohol and coffee tended to come up naturally as part of the remembering process for some of those interviewed. It is not surprising that explicit mentions of coffee and alcohol, at this point both taboo substances within contemporary LDS culture, were not always at the forefront of discussion. Some of the interview participants willingly and matter-of-factly introduced coffee and drinking rituals within the discourse of their local and home memories; for others it either was not relevant enough to mention, or then they avoided the topic due to its potentially incriminating associations, both for themselves and for their forbearers.

From the keyword search, there were eight hits relating to speaking Danish in the (childhood) home. There were nine hits relating to coffee being drunk in the (childhood) home⁵. In other words, while there were hundreds of hits for the lexeme *Danish* (269, to be exact), for this analysis I included only the hits where the word *Danish* referred to the language and, furthermore, where the mention of Danish language was described within the context of the interviewee’s (childhood) home. The same method was used to gain the hits for coffee: the lexeme *coffee* was used 25 times in the interviews, but in this analysis I included only the interview excerpts where coffee is mentioned within the context of the home. The reasoning was that I did not aim to investigate general discourse about Danish language or coffee, but rather recollections of these cultural manifestations in the home front, thereby helping to address the question of intergenerational exposure.

An initial observation is that when interviewees mentioned alcohol, it was often, although not exclusively, remembered within the context of parties or dances. When they talked about coffee, on the other hand, it tended to involve memories of the home. While the majority of the interviewees did not mention either coffee or Danish language as a presence in their (childhood) home, it is noteworthy that those who mentioned one were likely to mention the other. Table 1 presents an overview of the findings, noting the speaker (coded by year of birth plus gender) who made explicit mention of either coffee or Danish language.

Table 1: Speakers mentioning coffee and/or Danish at home.

Coffee	24F	28F	28F1	35F	36M		42F	45F	46F	49M
Danish		28F	28F1		36M	39F	42F	45F	46F	49M

Table 1 shows that 7 interview participants made specific mention of both the coffee ritual and the use of heritage Danish in the (childhood) home. As can be seen, although the numbers are small and need to be substantiated through further work, these findings hint that the use of coffee seems to connect with Danish language. The content analysis methods described here helped locate relevant interview excerpts from the data to address the research questions posed in Section 1. The data presented in Section 5, then, comes only from the seven speakers who mentioned both coffee and Danish (as shown in Table 1).

5. Results

With this analysis, at least an implicit link between coffee and Danish emerges, as these are themes that were discussed concurrently by seven of the interview participants. There are many possible explanations for this connection. Both the use of Danish and drinking coffee are, by modern standards in Sanpete County, unexpected or unusual behaviors, thereby making them comment-worthy. It could also be, that, as this study demonstrates, both habits died out with the same generation. The temporal connection points toward what we have already noted: an overall breakdown of overt Danishness, with the home front being the final context.

The research questions posed in the introduction to this article are now treated in turn, illustrated with some of the excerpts gained from the content analysis procedure.

5.1. RQ1: How do the interviewees link the taboo rituals of coffee and Danish?

As shown through Extract 1, the link between language and taboo rituals is not always explicit in the extract itself. To compensate, I have drawn examples from the larger study, as seen below the extract.

Extract 1

42F: *Oh, hey. They had a hard time with that Word of Wisdom. They weren't gonna give up their coffee, and then / I tasted beer many times at my grandparents.*

Interviewer: *They brewed it?*

⁵ For the purposes of this analysis, “home” could also mean the grandparents’ home.

- 42F: *No, no, they didn't brew it.*
 Interviewer: *But they just drank it.*
 42F: *Uh-huh. And they weren't alcoholics by any means, but they had... ja [yes]⁶.*

Within the larger linguistic study about Sanpete County, speaker 42F stood out as one who had strong memories of Danish rituals and language from both her parents and grandparents. From her own account, 42F's upbringing was instilled with a sense of being "Danish." For example, she noted that her mother, born in Utah, was called *Bitte Laura* 'Little Laura' by family members. The grandmother was called *Bedstemor* 'Grandmother.' Extract 1 is intended to illustrate the unproblematic relationship 42F had with her Danish heritage, which included the taboos of both coffee and Danish language – and in this case, also beer. Speaker 42F offers a simple, nonjudgmental statement of what she remembers from her childhood. At the end of the extract, she begins an attempt to explain her grandparents' behavior, but then thinks better of it, ending her description with a decisive falling tone on her turn-final "*Ja*."

Other participants described how coffee was brewed and drunk. For example, 46F noted that her grandparents, both born in Sanpete County, started the day by brewing coffee over an opening on the wood burning stove, adding more coffee and water to the pot throughout the day. 36M recounted the memory of his grandparents drinking coffee from saucers rather than cups, so that it would cool faster. These customs, which are historically linked to Danish customs from the 1800s (nordiccoffeeculture.com, n.d.), are echoed by speaker 28F, who, along with claiming that any visitor to her grandparents' home would be served coffee and a snack, goes on to discuss numerous superstitions carried on in their home, as in the example in Extract 2:

Extract 2

- 28F: [...] *Well, anybody that came to grandma's house would get coffee and æbleskivers*
 [ball-shaped pancakes].
 Interviewer: [Name] *you mean your grandmother.*
 28F: *Yes. And I remember once when we were there after I was old and grown up, we went in and uh Grandma started to make the æbleskivers. We said "Oh, we don't want to eat 'em," and Grandpa says "Now don't take her birthday away from her." If they didn't feed somebody, it was bad luck.*

Like 42F, the speaker in Extract 2 recounted several childhood memories which featured both Danish-speaking relatives and coffee. In Extract 2, speaker 28F is talking about her own grandparents, both born in Sanpete County. 28F is one participant who made an explicit link between women, coffee and Danish language: she described a family custom in which female family members would meet at an aunt's house for sewing, where they would drink coffee and speak Danish with the family matriarch, an immigrant from Jutland. Like 42F, 28F had a Danish term for her Utah-born grandmother: *Mamse*.

Among the historical records investigated for this study are several examples of printed invitations to parties and dances. The vast majority of this printed matter was in English – for example, a "Grand Scandinavian Ball" held on February 9, 1900. The English-language invitations all feature similar text, including the euphemism "refreshments free," meaning, presumably, that coffee was served. A rare example of a Danish-language invitation, to a *Skandinavisk Bal for Gifte Folk* 'Scandinavian ball for married people,' held on December 12, 1907, promised exactly that: "kaffe serveres fri." The word *fri* in this text is based on the English word 'free,' and it is not idiomatic in Standard Danish, where the preferred form would be *gratis* 'free of charge.' The language on the "Skandinavisk Bal" invitation merits attention not just for its localized use of written Danish, but also because it is the only invitation among some 50 to specifically mention coffee. That is, the link between coffee and Danish is made quite literally, at least in this specific context.

⁶ *Ja* is a local way of saying 'yes' or 'yeah' in Sanpete County. I have retained the orthography of the Scandinavian source form.

5.2. RQ2: How and why did the coffee ritual die?

A patriotic fervor – and concurrent shrugging off of European identity – is well-established along with the World War 1 era. This period coincides with strengthened adherence to the Word of Wisdom in the LDS Church, around the year 1921. The combined factors of American nationalism and an upgraded Word of Wisdom – against the backdrop of the predictable generational shift – created optimal conditions for Danish language and culture to fall away. Judging from the data presented previously, up until this period drinking coffee was an unproblematic part of Danish and, subsequently, Sanpete County life. The comments in Extracts 3 and 4 reflect on the subsequent period.

Extract 3

28F: *In fact [my grandfather] was quite old when he quit drinking coffee. When they finally decided that / well it was / well there really wasn't that much emphasis put on the Word of Wisdom until [...] it was quite well into Grandpa's age because I remember him saying how much better he felt since he quit drinking coffee.*

In this extract, 28F describes how, toward the end of his life, her grandfather finally conceded to the expectations of the LDS Church and stopped drinking coffee. During the interview, I interpreted her additional explanation of “how much better he felt” as a means of reasoning why her grandfather, an emblem of Danishness, would turn away from a quintessential Danish custom such as drinking coffee.

Extract 4

24F: *[...] But when Mom joined the church, then of course she gave up coffee. My dad drank coffee and she would make it, but she never did drink it.*

24F presents the most compelling example of the shift in attitudes toward both coffee and the Danish language. 24F's mother was an immigrant directly from Denmark, arriving in 1912. Her father was born in Sanpete County. 24F discusses her father speaking Danish (but not being able to write in Danish), as well as drinking coffee. On the other hand, she claims that her mother never spoke Danish at home, nor did she drink coffee. The claims about Danish are especially surprising, considering that her mother migrated as an adolescent, beyond the critical period of language acquisition. As a relatively late immigrant, it is possible that she was subjected to a different set of expectations than earlier migrants.

5.3. RQ3. How did/do locals justify the drinking of coffee?

Numerous historical and folkloric accounts from Sanpete County tell of observant, high-ranking LDS Church members who drank coffee and even alcohol. Clearly, such instances create a conundrum worthy of repeating, otherwise they would not figure in so prominently with local narratives, including the interviews for this study.

Extract 5

28F1: *My grandfather would always have his coffee before he left for the temple session.*

Interviewer: *Before he left for the temple session.*

28F1: *Absolutely.*

Interviewer: *That's what you did.*

28F1: *I don't think those Danes could have lived without their coffee.*

The LDS temple is the holiest place a faithful Mormon can visit. Only Mormons with a verification card are allowed to enter LDS temples and participate in most temple ceremonies. For 28F1, there is an apparent contradiction in the fact that her grandfather would drink coffee before going to an LDS temple.

Extract 6

- 42F: *Ja, but my father wouldn't [hide that he drank coffee]: "You accept me the way it is." You know. And yet he was active in the church.*
- Interviewer: *I guess then it was maybe/ Well I know that the [church, they just didn't like] it but people still did it and I don't think you see so much of that these days.*
- 42F: *[They really had a hard time.] (.) No you don't. But/ but that/ I was in the era when it still hadn't died out.*

A reconciliatory theme is apparent in these extracts: both speakers note that the men in question were high-standings LDS Church members, yet because they were “Danish” and “it was a different time,” they were able to drink coffee and still maintain a high standing in the Church. It is noteworthy that both of these speakers mention male family members. Earlier analyses of the Sanpete County data (Kühl & Peterson 2018) posited that the relatively more private sphere of women enabled women to hang onto certain features of Danish, whereas the more public role of men decreased their opportunities to maintain productive language. For the men mentioned in these extracts, a Danish custom persisted in the form of coffee.

5.4. RQ4. *What do such rituals mean in terms of representations of localized Danishness today?*

As mentioned in the introduction to this article, Scandinavian heritage is a significant component of local Sanpete County identity. The Danish language is at the final vestiges, with only a few lexical items remaining at any level of awareness, and these among the oldest generation. Danish is on the verge of complete shift, but what about Danishness – for example, the coffee ritual?

Of the people interviewed for this study, two were active consumers of coffee. These two siblings have been informants for a number of Danish household items and notions, including *kikkers* ‘viewers’, a viewing device they played with as children, and *nissen* ‘elf’, the main character of a story one of them was able to tell partially in Danish – the punchline, to be exact, although she could not recall where or how she learned it. These siblings also shared the local cultural notion of “flying coffee pots” (noted also in written accounts of the local folklore; see Johnson 1973), meaning that coffee pots are quickly hidden away when a representative from the LDS Church approaches a home. In addition, both siblings have visited Denmark.

During my visits to Sanpete County, one of these siblings hosted a coffee and *æbleskivers* event. Family members dropped by the house, sharing their own family recipes and styles for eating *æbleskivers*, *surmelk* and other Danish food items. This event indicates that a sense of Danishness can survive in a relatively stable yet personalized fashion, embedded within micro-rituals carried out in the home.

6. Conclusion

At this juncture, there is no way to establish whether coffee and Danish language simply existed in the same time and place, or if there exists a causal relationship; that is, did continuing to speak Danish somehow correlate with drinking coffee? Generational language shift, concurrent with the WWI era, happened to co-occur with the upgrading of the Word of Wisdom. While this is largely historical coincidence, what is of interest in the case of Sanpete County is that the two cultural manifestations – coffee and language – appear to connect in the minds of people who were interviewed for the study. In making sense of their own history, many individuals are prompted to mention both coffee and Danish language: these cultural factors are clearly noteworthy and intertwined for many (not all) people of Danish heritage. As noted at the beginning of this article, the work presented here is preliminary, hinting at what could be a more robust avenue of research. The role of coffee for men of Scandinavian descent, especially, emerges as a possible site of exploration. As shown through previous work, Sanpete County women appeared to hang onto Danish cultural manifestations a bit longer, including language⁷. Further evidence points toward the possibility that for men, the coffee ritual provided a means of hanging onto a Danish identity after the language was gone, to some extent even in the current era.

⁷ An exception is the use of the agreement particle *ja*, which men are more highly favored to use than women (Peterson 2018).

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